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Item 133 of the preliminary list*
Pattern of conferences

Pattern of conferences

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report contains information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna, pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 70/9 and 32/72 and other relevant mandates. The report begins with a brief analytical overview, which is followed by sections presenting the results and developments recorded in meetings management and documents management in 2015, together with cost-efficiency initiatives and cross-cutting issues. It ends with a set of conclusions, recommendations and proposed next steps. Information is summarized to the extent possible in order to keep the report succinct and within the word limit. Statistical data are provided as supplementary information.[a] Electronic versions of the documents of the Committee on Conferences are available from https://meetings.un.org/en/ga/coc.

[a] See http://coc.dgacm.org/2016/Documents/2016_Supplementary_Information.pdf.

* A/71/50.

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I. Introduction

1. Quality, timeliness, cost-effectiveness, sustainability and accessibility with regard to conference services, as well as multilingualism, remain the goals of the Secretariat as it seeks to fulfil the mandates given by Member States. Constant as those goals may be, the context in which United Nations conference services are provided has changed profoundly in recent years, presenting the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the conference-management operations in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi funded through section 2, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council affairs and conference management, of the programme budget with sizeable challenges. The most indicative of these is the 45 per cent increase, since 2010, in the number of meetings serviced each year, and the accompanying 10 per cent surge in documentation (see figs. I and II), with particularly sharp rises, of 23 and 8 per cent, respectively, being recorded in 2015, which resulted in the Secretariat servicing 36,000 meetings and translating close to 250 million words that year.

Figure I
Total number of meetings held, 2010-2015

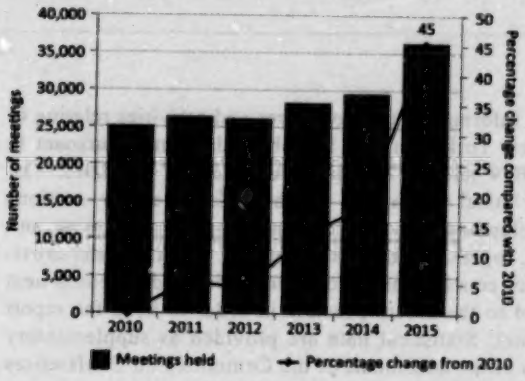


Figure II
Total number of words translated, 2010-2015

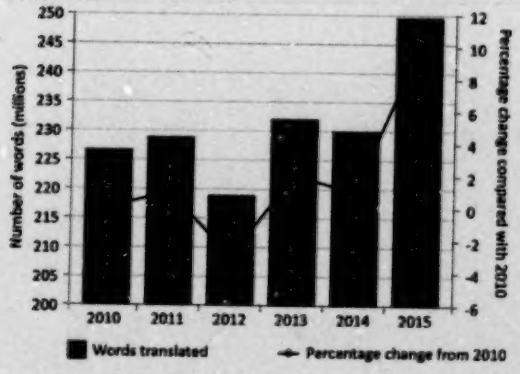
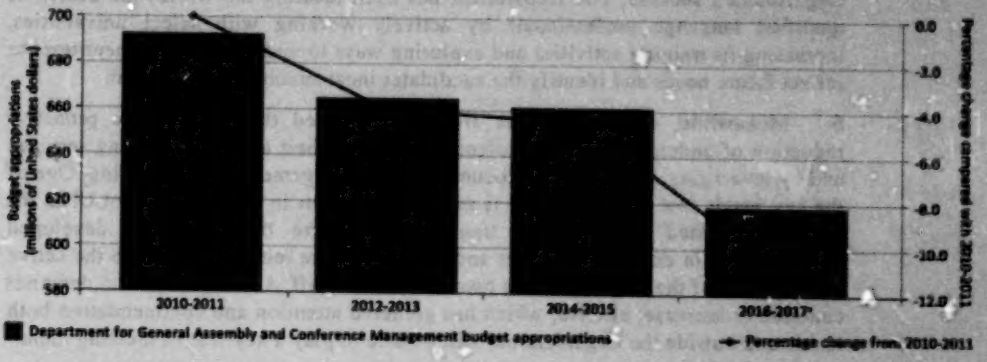


Figure III
Budget appropriations, 2010-2017



[a] Initial appropriation figures, with final figures to be released in 2018.

2. Meanwhile, there has been a steady reduction in the Department's biennial budget appropriations, as shown in figure III in nominal terms, indicating an even greater reduction in resources in real terms. This has limited the flexibility required to handle unplanned additional workload in particular. Nevertheless, the Secretariat managed, in 2015, not only to maintain, but also, in almost all cases, to improve its performance in every key indicator.

3. The Department strives to manage its operations as strategically as possible to meet the needs of Member States, the diminishing resources and increasing workload occasioned by new mandates notwithstanding. The increased workload affects all duty stations. For example, the Human Rights Council held 156 meetings over three sessions in Geneva in 2015, compared with the 100 meetings held at its inception. In essence, 15.5 weeks of meetings were compressed into 10 weeks. The number of informal meetings of the General Assembly with full service requirements increased from 23 at the fifty-fifth session, in 2000, to 327 at the sixty-ninth session, in 2014.

4. Going forward, the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division is expected to provide direct secretariat support to the intergovernmental and expert bodies engaged in the follow-up to and review of the implementation of the mandates emanating from the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. Ten new mandates relating to the 2030 Agenda have been added to the Division's work programme since 2015; and the mandates addressed directly to the President of the General Assembly, the President of the Economic and Social Council and the presiding officers of the other bodies serviced by Division have become tangible additions to those addressed to the bodies themselves. Supporting the Chairs and their offices has become far more laborious, in particular owing to the increased complexity of the mandates (which require, for example, the negotiation of the modalities and outcomes of major United Nations conferences, high-level plenary meetings of the General Assembly and high-level meetings of the Economic and Social Council and the operationalization of the new bodies established by the Assembly as part of the programme to implement the Sustainable Development Goals).

5. Enhancing the Secretariat's conference-servicing workforce and furnishing it with the skills and tools required today and tomorrow are essential to the Department's success. The Department has been tackling the worldwide dearth of qualified language professionals by actively working with select universities, increasing its training activities and exploring ways to update its recruitment tests to reflect future needs and identify the candidates most suitable to meet them.

6. Meanwhile, efficiency gains are being pursued through a more proactive reduction of underutilization by calendar bodies of their allocated meeting services and by leveraging technology in documentation management and processing. One of the key assets that the Secretariat is seeking to exploit in this regard is eLUNa, the computer-assisted and machine translation platform that has been developed in-house, within existing resources and, notably, at the initiative and with the active participation of the Organization's own translation staff. As documentation demands continue to increase, eLUNa, which has garnered attention and commendation both inside and outside the Organization, will be able to play a key role in meeting them.

7. In the pursuit of synergies and greater efficiency, the Department established a steering group in 2015, chaired by the Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and comprising senior management at all duty stations. Significant progress was achieved through its activities in the harmonization of processes and procedures, with due regard for the specificities of each duty station; the mainstreaming of conference management information technology solutions; the standardization of performance indicators and costing methodologies; and the streamlining of reporting structures and procedures, to ensure greater clarity and coherence in conference management throughout the Secretariat. A common quality control methodology for contractual translation was developed, and the global roster for contractual translators and text processors was consolidated by synchronizing the rosters in the contractual management application and using Umoja.

8. Multilingualism is a core value of the United Nations, and the Secretariat will continue to respond to Member States' high expectations in this area within the budgetary envelope provided. The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, in her capacity as Coordinator for Multilingualism, is developing a policy framework that will direct and secure progress in the field of multilingualism. These efforts will be reported to Member States separately under the agenda item in question.

II. Meetings management

A. Calendar of conferences and meetings

1. Draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings for 2017

9. At its substantive session, in September 2016, the Committee on Conferences will review the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings for 2017 (A/AC.172/2016/L.2) and transmit its recommendations to the General Assembly in its report for 2016 (to be issued as A/71/32, annexes I and II).

2. Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243

10. Requests to meet during the main part of the seventy-first session of the General Assembly have been received from seven bodies (see sect. I, part A, of the supplementary information). In accordance with established practice, the requests will be reviewed by the Committee on Conferences, which will make a recommendation to the Assembly.

3. Intersessional departures

11. The Committee on Conferences approved six requests for intersessional departures (see sect. I, part B, of the supplementary information), but, owing to budgetary constraints, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, one of the bodies that had submitted a request, opted to hold its seventy-fifth session in Geneva instead of in New York.

B. Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

1. Analysis of utilization of conference-servicing resources by United Nations organs

Utilization of conference-servicing resources by all calendar bodies

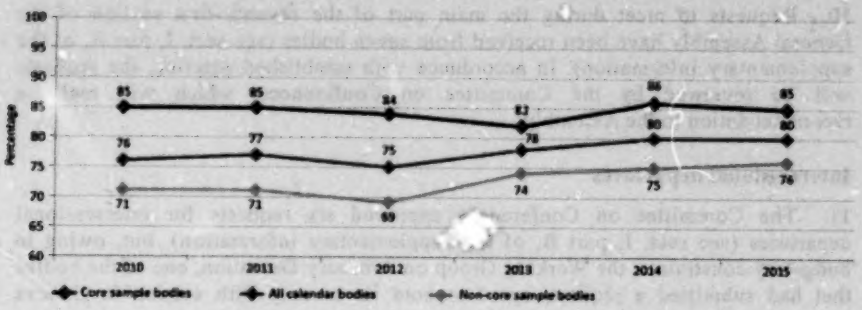
12. The total number of meetings held at the four duty stations in 2015 increased by 23 per cent compared with 2014, from 29,497 to 36,316 (see sect. II, tables 1A to 1F, of the supplementary information).

13. To provide a full picture of the utilization of conference-servicing resources, the present report introduces a new methodology that adjusts the scope and reporting cycle. It broadens the scope of reporting beyond the core sample to include all calendar bodies across all four duty stations. Traditionally, reporting of utilization has focused on a core sample of bodies, which accounts for only 29 per cent of the calendar meetings, on the assumption that their performance is a reflection of that of United Nations organs as a whole. Over the years, however, it has been noticed that, while the average utilization factor of the core sample bodies has improved as a result of increased attention and targeted efforts, the utilization rates of the bodies not included in the core sample have been considerably lower than those of the bodies in the core sample.

14. At the same time, experience shows that the traditional time range for reporting does not accurately measure the utilization of conference-servicing resources. A utilization rate based on a three-year cycle is often distorted by abnormality in one year, while a rate based on a 10-year cycle often targets the bodies that have already improved their performance, often significantly, in recent years. It is therefore believed that a six-year reporting cycle would be sufficiently long to reveal trends in utilization while still providing data current enough to be meaningful in measuring the utilization of resources.

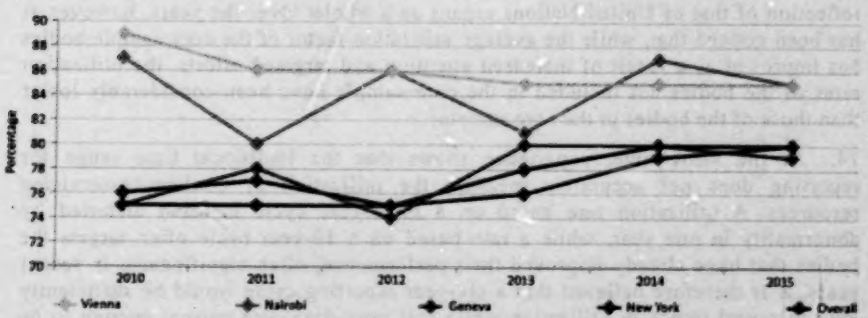
15. Consequently, the Secretariat is reporting on the utilization of all formal meetings of all calendar bodies held at the four duty stations over the past six years (see fig. IV) in order to address underutilization more broadly and to achieve greater efficiencies across all intergovernmental bodies. For reference, both the utilization for the past three years of the calendar bodies in the core sample and the utilization for the past six years of all calendar bodies are presented in section II, tables 2A to 5F, of the supplementary information.

Figure IV
Utilization of conference-servicing resources by core and non-core sample bodies



16. In 2015, the overall utilization of allocated meeting services was 80 per cent, as in 2014, notwithstanding an increase of 10 per cent in the number of meetings programmed and an increase of 8 per cent in the number of meetings held. Both New York and Geneva showed a sustained improvement from 2010 to 2015, while utilization remained above 80 per cent in Vienna and Nairobi (see fig. V). These positive results were achieved through continued efforts to work closely with the secretariats of calendar bodies on refining their programmes of work and adjusting their interpretation requirements, which resulted in a reduction of 31 per cent in the number of cancellations and an improvement of 14 per cent, since 2014, in the number of minutes lost as a result of a late start or an early ending of a meeting — the two main factors affecting service utilization.

Figure V
Utilization of conference-servicing resources by duty station, 2010-2015



Intergovernmental bodies whose utilization of meeting services was below 80 per cent

17. Pursuant to paragraph 29 of General Assembly resolution 70/9, the Chair of the Committee on Conferences met in June 2016 with the Chair of the Committee on Information, given that that committee's utilization of meeting services for each of the past three years has been below the benchmark of 80 per cent. Consultations on behalf of the Chair of the Committee on Conferences were held with

representatives of the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund and the Second Committee in the same regard. All three bodies were encouraged to employ additional measures to improve their utilization of conference-servicing resources.

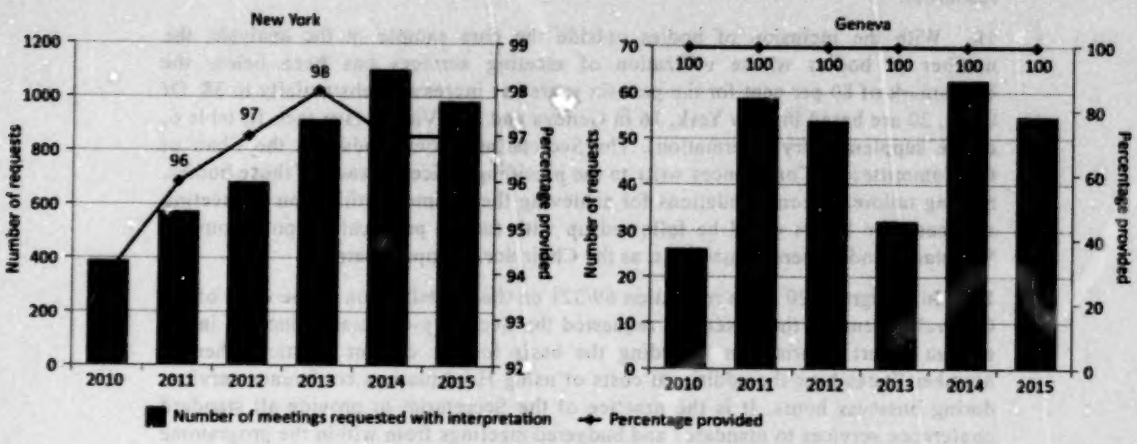
18. With the inclusion of bodies outside the core sample in the analysis, the number of bodies whose utilization of meeting services has been below the benchmark of 80 per cent for the past six years has increased substantially to 38. Of those, 20 are based in New York, 16 in Geneva and 2 in Vienna (see sect. II, table 6, of the supplementary information). The Secretariat recommends that the Chair of the Committee on Conferences write to the presiding officer of each of those bodies, making tailored recommendations for achieving the optimum utilization of meeting services. The letters could be followed up with further practical support from the Secretariat and in-person meetings, as the Chair deems appropriate.

19. In paragraph 20 of its resolution 69/321 on the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to include in the present report information regarding the basis for the current practice whereby Member States bear the additional costs of using Headquarters conference services during business hours. It is the practice of the Secretariat to provide all standard conference services to mandated and budgeted meetings from within the programme budget appropriation. For meetings that are not mandated, such as those organized by permanent missions to the United Nations, departments and offices of the Secretariat, as well as those of intergovernmental or expert bodies and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes that have legislative mandates but no budgetary provision, the Secretariat, in line with the administrative instruction on the use of United Nations premises for meetings, conferences, special events and exhibits (ST/AI/416), applies cost-recovery requirements during regular business hours based on the all-inclusive cost of a conference room, which covers electricity and cleaning services, but excludes heating, ventilation and air conditioning. The last-mentioned costs are recovered only for meetings in the early hours, after hours, at weekends and on official United Nations holidays. The cost of special event coordination is charged on an hourly basis and varies depending on the support and coordination required. In addition to the standard costs of the conference room and special event coordination, cost recovery is also applied for any additional ad hoc specific services that may be requested in connection with non-mandated meetings.

2. Provision of interpretation services to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required"

20. As shown in figure VI, the number of meeting requests from "as required" bodies remained high in New York in 2015, although fewer meetings were requested by the General Assembly and the Security Council than in 2014. Almost all (97 per cent) of the requests were met. In Geneva, 100 per cent of "as required" meeting requests, all from the Human Rights Council, were met (see sect. III, tables 1 and 2, of the supplementary information). No "as required" bodies meet in Vienna or Nairobi.

Figure VI
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of bodies entitled to meet "as required" in New York and Geneva, 2010-2015



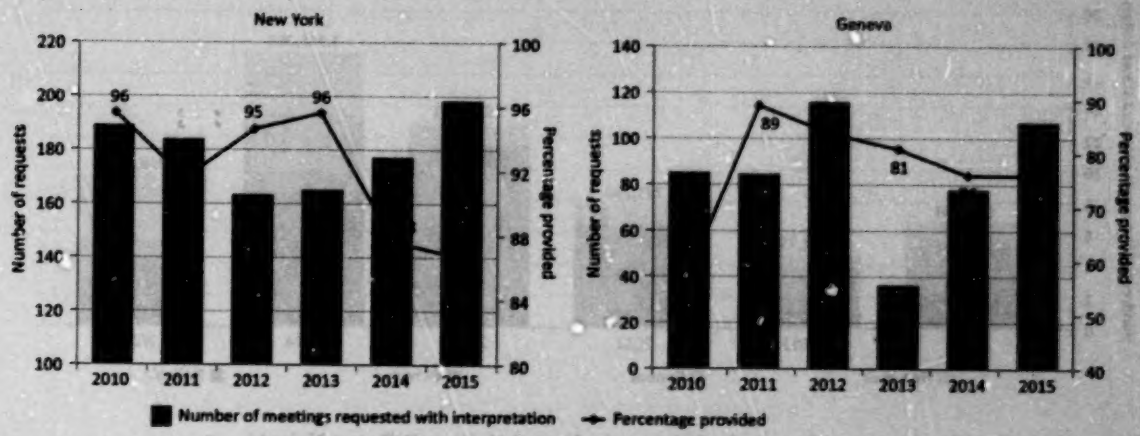
3. Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

21. Figure VII and section IV of the supplementary information summarize the provision of meeting services with interpretation to regional and other major groupings of Member States at the four duty stations from 2010 to 2015. In New York, both the number of such meetings requested and the number of requests met increased by 12 per cent between 2014 and 2015. The decline in the percentage of requests met in 2014 and 2015, compared with 2013, was brought about by the increasingly high volume of requests from bodies entitled to meet "as required", including the six new sanctions bodies established since 2010, and by the extension of sessions of calendar bodies, such as the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and the Second and Fifth Committees. It is to be noted that, as interpretation services in New York were increasingly consumed by meetings of "as required" bodies, and as calendar bodies became more efficient in their utilization of conference services, fewer cancellations were made, which in turn reduced the interpretation services available for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, which were serviced on an "if available" basis.

22. In Geneva, the proportion of requests from regional and other major groupings of Member States that were met in 2015 was 76 per cent, as in 2014. The number of such requests, however, increased significantly: the number received rose by 37 per cent and the number met by 25 per cent.

23. In Vienna and Nairobi, the number of meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States requested is statistically negligible. Additional data on meetings management are provided in section VII, part D, of the supplementary information.

Figure VII
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States in New York and Geneva, 2010-2015



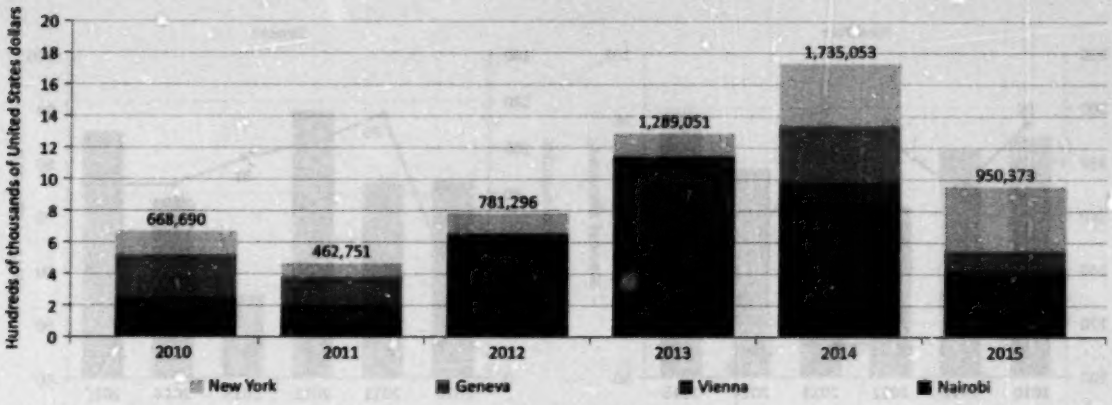
4. Meetings held away from established headquarters

24. The integrated global management rule for providing interpretation services at meetings held away from established headquarters, whereby such meetings are serviced by interpretation teams from the geographically closest duty station rather than that at which the body that is meeting is headquartered, continued to be applied in 2015. With regard to travel, interpreters are subject to the same rules as all staff members. Within those parameters, every effort is made to ensure that interpreters arrive in time to be adequately rested before they enter the booth when servicing meetings away from established headquarters.

25. A total of $950,373 was saved in 2015 as a result of applying the rule (see fig. VIII). This is significantly lower than the $1.7 million saved in 2014 and the $1.3 million saved in 2013 because there were fewer meetings held away from established headquarters in 2015 (27, compared with 34 in 2014 and 31 in 2013) and the formula for calculating savings was modified in 2015 to provide a more complete picture by accounting for previously hidden elements such as staff replacement costs and daily subsistence allowance. The meetings to which the rule was applied in 2015 and the associated cost savings are detailed in section V of the supplementary information.

26. It merits noting that 88 per cent of the savings in 2015 were accrued to host countries or other international or regional organizations that requested assistance from the Secretariat. Only 12 per cent ($110,111) were accrued to section 2, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council affairs and conference management, of the programme budget.

Figure VIII
Notional savings from the application of the integrated global management rule in servicing meetings away from established headquarters



5. Utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

27. In 2015, in accordance with several resolutions of the General Assembly, including paragraph 23 of resolution 70/9, all meetings of Nairobi-based bodies were held in Nairobi, in conformity with the headquarters rule.

6. Utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa

28. Information on the utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa is presented in the annex to the present report.

7. Summary records, verbatim records and digital recordings

29. Summary records and verbatim records remain the only official records of discussions in United Nations bodies. The number of verbatim records produced by the Department remained relatively high (439), as in 2014 (438), and 14 per cent higher than in 2013. The number of summary records produced rose by 23 per cent: from 315 to 419 in New York and from 499 to 580 in Geneva, driven by the increase in the number of meetings held at those duty stations.

30. Digital recordings are available as a service to any meeting body wishing to use them as a complementary service or to replace the written records to which they are entitled. Three Vienna-based bodies continued to use digital recordings in 2015. During the year, there were more than 5,000 downloads from the system.

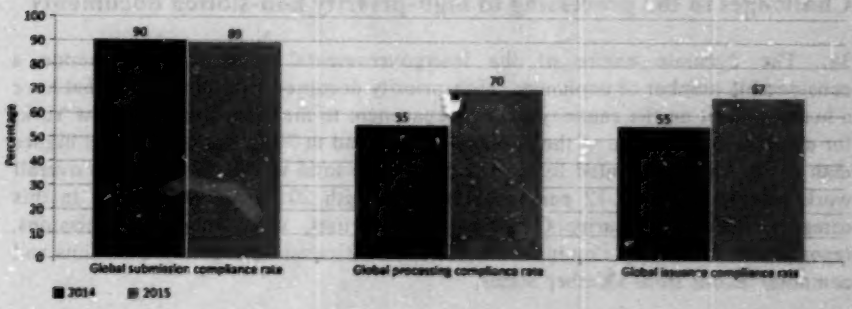
III. Documents management

A. Timely submission, processing and issuance of documents

31. Globally, considerable improvements were recorded in the key performance indicators of documents management in 2015, as shown in figure IX. In comparison with the previous year, compliance by author departments with deadlines for

submitting slotted documents for processing (editing, translation and formatting) was down by a percentage point, but compliance by the Secretariat with the processing deadlines, namely the four-week turnaround time for documents that are within word limits and submitted on time, reached 70 per cent, considerably higher than the 55 per cent recorded in 2014, and compliance by the Secretariat with mandated issuance time frames was 67 per cent, up from 55 per cent in 2014. A breakdown of the performance of each duty station with regard to these three indicators is provided in section VI and section VII, part B, of the supplementary information.

Figure IX
Timely submission, processing and issuance of documents in 2014 and 2015



32. Timely issuance depends on several factors: the volume and predictability of the workload, the existence of competing priorities, adherence by author entities to established deadlines for slotted documents, processing capacity (which in turn depends on internal and external staffing levels) and the number and length of non-slotted documents submitted for rush processing. It should be noted that the timely submission figures shown in figure IX refer to submission by an agreed slot date, not necessarily submission in accordance with the mandated time frames of 10 or 8 weeks before consideration. Globally, only 83 per cent of documents processed in 2015 were received in accordance with the mandated time frames. The improvement of 12 per cent in timely issuance in 2015 was achieved thanks to conference management staff working closely with major clients, monitoring workload forecasts and at times negotiating the early submission of documents for processing, and to the language services not only meeting more processing deadlines, but also reducing turnaround times.

33. As in previous years, external factors beyond the control of author departments and offices prevented some documents from being submitted for processing within the mandated time frames. This held particularly true for documents for consideration by the Fifth Committee. To address the perennial challenge posed by Fifth Committee documentation systematically, the Department continued to collaborate closely with the author entities and the secretariats of the Committee and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, in order to project the issuance dates of all pre-session documents for the Fifth Committee based on their length, submission deadlines and historical consideration pattern. As a result of these efforts and the extraordinary work of the language services, of the 95 reports slotted for the main session of the Fifth

Committee in 2015, 60 were issued six weeks before consideration. This was achieved even though those reports averaged nearly 18,000 words, only 57 had been received 10 weeks before consideration and only 38 were within the established word limits. In addition, as in 2014, all 21 reports of the Board of Auditors were provided to the Advisory Committee in all official languages in time for its session in the third quarter. The word count of those reports has also increased dramatically since the adoption of the International Public Sector Accounting Standards — from a previous annual average of 840,875 words to 951,547 words in 2015 (13 per cent). Notably, for the first time ever, the sizeable report of the Advisory Committee on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2016-2017 (A/70/7) was issued more than four weeks before its consideration by the Fifth Committee.

B. Challenges in the processing of high-priority non-slotted documents

34. The dynamic nature of the intergovernmental process can generate a considerable number of unplanned, high-priority documents for processing that have a heavy impact on the capacity of the Department to meet deadlines. In New York, for example, the volume of the unplanned workload in 2015 was 19 per cent higher than in 2014 and accounted for 55 per cent of the total workload, while the overall workload increased by 12 per cent compared with 2014. The documents in this category included Security Council sanctions lists, treaty-related submissions, reports of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions and communications from Member States.

35. In this respect, the processing of reports of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions poses a particular challenge at Headquarters. During the main part of the seventieth session of the General Assembly, the Department received 50 reports from the Advisory Committee, totalling 338,191 words, which it succeeded in processing in an average of three calendar days. Many of the Committee's reports were, however, despite the Department's best efforts, ultimately issued very close to their consideration dates.

C. Waivers of word limits

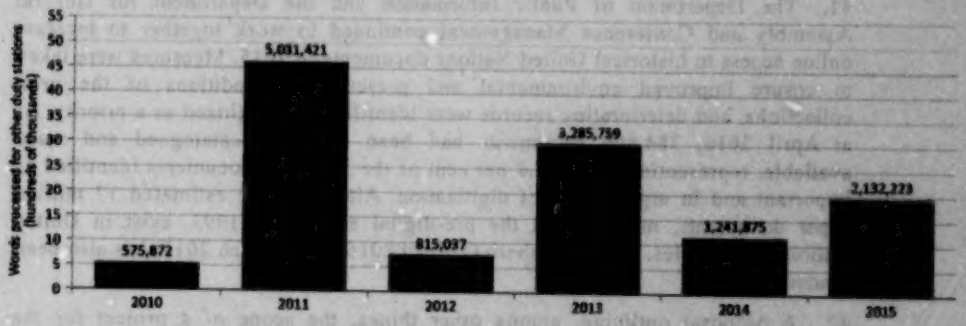
36. In 2015, 82 per cent of documents submitted for processing within the established time slots in New York were within the word limits, and proactive waiver management (reminding author departments of word limits and processing timelines during the planning stage) resulted in 2.3 million fewer words being processed than originally requested. At the United Nations Office at Geneva, nearly all slotted documents were within the word limits, except for five from the Joint Inspection Unit. Compliance with word limits was 86 per cent at the United Nations Office at Vienna, as a result of the submission of a higher number of documents of a legal nature not subject to the word limits, and 95 per cent at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, where only one document exceeded the limits.

D. Workload sharing

37. The total amount of translation workload shared among duty stations in 2015 was 2.13 million words, 72 per cent more than in 2014, as shown in figure X. The

surge in 2011 was due to the one-time transfer of a documentation backlog from the United Nations Office at Geneva to New York. The increase in 2013 was the result of the transfer of responsibility for processing pre-session documents of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women from Geneva to New York, which is now fully integrated into the latter's workload and no longer counted as workload sharing. A breakdown of workload sharing by duty station in 2011-2015 is provided in section VI, part E, of the supplementary information.

Figure X
Workload sharing among duty stations, 2010-2015



E. Simultaneous distribution of documents

38. Simultaneous distribution of documents is one of the pillars of multilingualism that the Department makes every effort to achieve without exception. In 2015, simultaneous distribution rates varied among duty stations. The compliance rate in New York was 100 per cent and at the United Nations Office at Nairobi remained high at 95 per cent, but stood at 66 and 72 per cent, respectively, at the United Nations Offices at Geneva and Vienna. The reasons for non-simultaneous distribution were mainly instructions from intergovernmental bodies, submitting departments and offices that some language versions should be issued before the others were ready, as was the case with a number of Human Rights Council documents; technical problems that occurred in the transition to the gDoc system; and the methods of uploading information to the Official Document System (ODS) varying slightly by duty station owing to the specificity of the local information technology systems. The uploading process is fully automated in New York, Vienna and Nairobi and is scheduled to be automated in Geneva by the end of 2016.

F. Document storage

1. Improvement of the Official Document System

39. ODS (http://ods.un.org) is the repository of United Nations parliamentary documents in the six official languages. Since its introduction in 1993, it has undergone several upgrades, including the launch of a public site (http://documents.un.org), direct access to content via weblinks connected to document symbols and the introduction of an e-subscription service (http://undocs.org).

40. In 2015, the Office of Information and Communications Technology, in coordination with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Department of Public Information, initiated an ODS improvement project. The updated site is designed to deliver a better user experience by offering accessibility on a wide range of mobile devices, swift and advanced search features, clearer presentation of search results, multiple downloads of documents and the ability to store typical searches and bookmarks. The ODS server infrastructure was also upgraded to the latest technical and information security standards, providing greater stability and performance.

2. Digitization and uploading of important older United Nations documents

41. The Department of Public Information and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management continued to work together to increase online access to historical United Nations documents in 2015. Measures were taken to ensure improved environmental and preservation conditions of the print collections, and deteriorating records were identified and digitized as a priority. As at April 2016, 384,860 documents had been digitized, catalogued and made available, representing some 12.8 per cent of the 3 million documents identified as important and in urgent need of digitization. Altogether, an estimated 17 million paper documents, mostly from the pre-digital era before 1993, exist in United Nations repositories. The third phase (1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017) has also been funded by Qatar.

42. A proposal outlining, among other things, the scope of a project for the digitization of important older United Nations documents will be included as part of the annual report of the Secretary-General to the Committee on Information. It is proposed that all future updates on this project be reported under the agenda item entitled "Questions relating to information" rather than under the item entitled "Pattern of conferences".

IV. Leveraging technology to increase efficiency

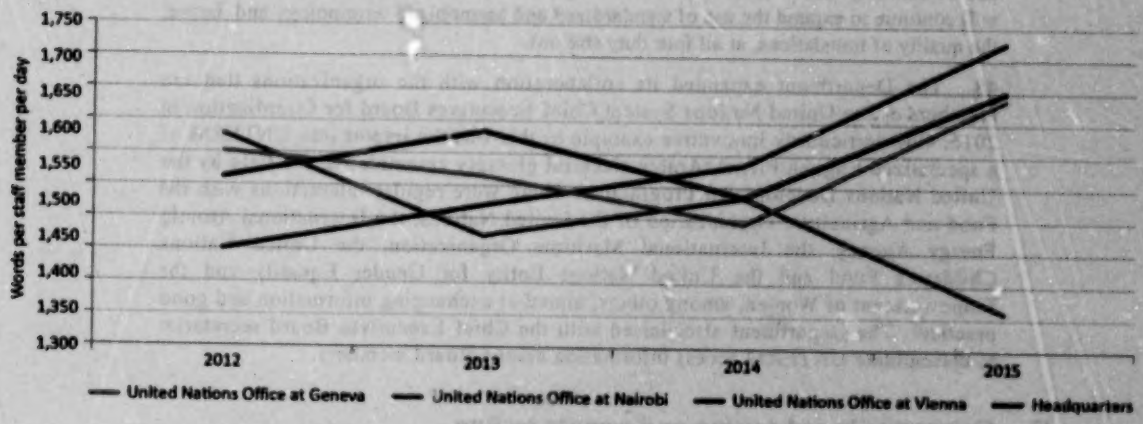
43. In pursuit of greater efficiency, sustainability and productivity, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is leveraging advances in technology in multiple ways.

A. Fully electronic workflows

44. The Department is moving rapidly towards a fully electronic, i.e. internally paperless, workflow, through the implementation at the four duty stations of its two document planning and processing systems, and the four interacting gText applications, namely: eLUNa, the computer-assisted translation tool; Tapta4UN, the statistical machine translation tool; Document Storage, the repository of bilingual parallel texts; and eRef, the automated referencing tool. Together, these applications increase efficiency by expediting the provision of the reference materials with which translators work and automating terminology recognition. Their installation at the four duty stations was completed in 2015, as was the training of all language staff. The streamlining of the workflow, the creation of unified databases and the harmonization of systems, together with the increased use of eLUNa, contributed to

the sharp rise in productivity in 2015 at the three duty stations that handled 97 per cent of the Department's translation workload that year (see fig. XI). It should be noted that the decline in productivity at the United Nations Office at Nairobi was due to a high vacancy rate that was brought down only in the second half of the year (see sect. V) and the steep learning curve for new recruits. In small translation services, such as those in Nairobi, this has a large impact on overall figures. More data on productivity in translation, editing and text-processing are provided in section VII, part C, of the supplementary information.

Figure XI
Translator productivity, 2012-2015



45. Moreover, as a web-based tool, eLUNa can be used by translators working remotely, making it possible for contractual staff to also benefit from its time-saving and consistency-enhancing features. This will help the Department to increase the externalization of translation work while preserving quality. A new eLUNa interface for editing was designed in 2015 and will be developed and piloted in 2016 so that editing can be fully integrated into the electronic workflow. The Department will also seek academic partners to conduct research into the editing distance of Tapta4UN, i.e. how many changes on average a professional translator needs to introduce to bring a sentence translated by the application to the same quality as a human translator. No metrics currently exist for measuring the extent to which statistical machine translation can increase productivity.

46. One obstacle limiting the cost-saving potential of eLUNa is the large number of Member State communications that are received in portable document format (PDF) instead of in Microsoft Word, the existence of submission guidelines notwithstanding. It takes some 15 minutes to convert and clean up a single PDF page using optical character recognition (OCR) technology for subsequent electronic processing. This additional workload has a significant impact on the productivity of the language staff involved. At least 15,000 PDF pages in 2015, including most of the 8,900 pages of treaties, required OCR processing, representing 3,750 staff-hours for that task alone. In addition, all documents in Arabic submitted in PDF format have to be translated without the benefits of eLUNa because OCR software does not work well with Arabic.

B. Establishment of a single terminology database

47. To ensure the consistency and accuracy of the terminology used in the translation and interpretation services, work continued on the development, maintenance and updating of the UNTERM global multilingual terminology portal, with a view to achieving harmonization of the terminology used at the four duty stations and the regional commissions. The language services worked on bringing their own databases into line with UNTERM, which currently provides one-stop access to data from the four duty stations and four regional commissions, as well as from the United Nations Development Programme, the International Maritime Organization and the European institutions. In 2015, those data generated more than 3 million searches. The increased use of eLUNa, whose automatic term-recognition feature is connected to UNTERM, will continue to expand the use of standardized and harmonized terminology and, hence, the quality of translations, at all four duty stations.

48. The Department expanded its collaboration with the organizations that are members of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination in 2015. One particularly innovative example of this was the import into UNTERM of a specialized English/French/Arabic electoral glossary assembled in the field by the United Nations Development Programme. There were regular interactions with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Maritime Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, among others, aimed at exchanging information and good practices. The Department also liaised with the Chief Executives Board secretariat to disseminate UNTERM access information among Board members.

C. Computer-based testing and remote testing

49. Computer-based testing for translators improves test validity, and remote testing increases the candidate pool by making it unnecessary for candidates to travel to test centres. Breaking with a long tradition of pen-and-paper tests, both remote and computer-based testing were piloted in the language competitive examinations for English translators/précis-writers and for English editors held in July 2015. The feedback from the candidates and the language services involved was highly positive. Specifically, the new method reduced the time spent by senior revisers at the grading stage, and the resulting roster of 19 candidates for staff posts in the English Translation Service and 20 in the Editing Section included 3 nationals of African and Caribbean Member States. The competitive examination for English translators/précis-writers also identified 23 second-tier candidates for temporary work and traineeships. These encouraging results paved the way for the pilot of a fully remote competitive examination in 2016.

V. Staffing

50. While the implementation of technological tools, the harmonization of practices and the standardization of systems have helped to increase efficiency, maintaining the mandated highest quality standards remains dependent on the Secretariat's language staff. Several steps were taken in 2015 to ensure that staffing and contractual roster levels were adequate for handling the increased workload.

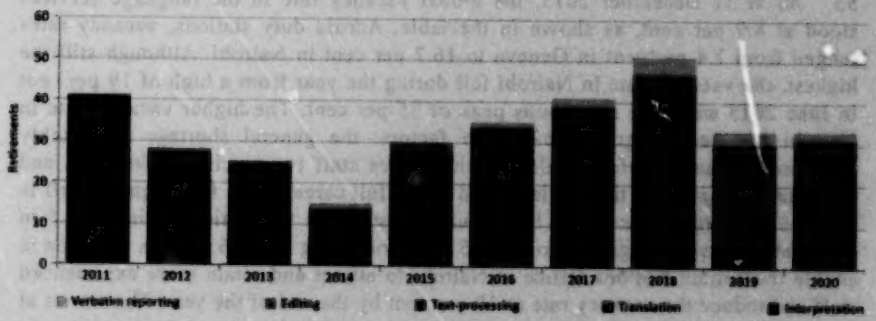
A. Retirements and recruitment

51. The Secretariat is facing a new wave of retirements in the language services in the near future, as shown in figure XII.

52. Vacant posts for translators, interpreters, verbatim reporters and editors are filled from rosters of suitable candidates that are established through language competitive examinations. Eight such examinations were held in 2015, two more than in 2014.

53. Of the eight examinations held, seven have yielded 103 candidates overall to date, compared with the 38 candidates yielded by the six examinations held in 2014. Most importantly, thanks to a vigorous outreach campaign (see sect. D), the examination for French translators yielded record numbers of applicants (1,119 applicants in 2015, compared with 612 in 2014 and 460 in 2013) and successful candidates (28, compared with 7 in 2014 and 17 in 2013). This is expected to help to significantly reduce one of the more critical vacancy rates in the Department. For the results of individual examinations in 2015, see section VII, part E, table 2, of the supplementary information.

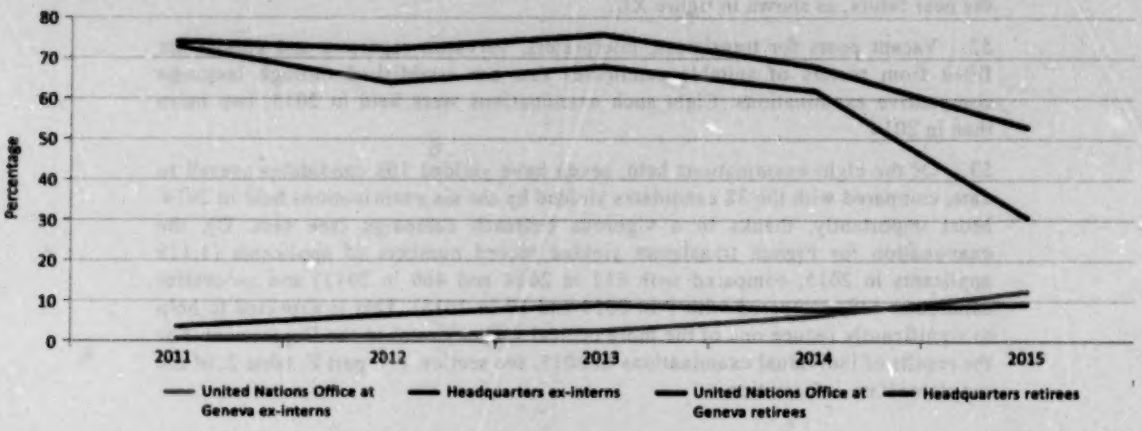
Figure XII
Historical and projected number of retirements among language staff, 2011-2020



Note: Data for 2011-2015 are historical; data for 2016-2020 are projections based on the mandatory retirement age at the time of recruitment.

54. Other proactive succession-planning measures in 2015 included 52 freelance tests that yielded 73 new candidates for temporary and contractual work, of whom 18 were former interns. Figure XIII shows how the proportion of former interns among temporary translation staff in New York and Geneva has risen steadily since the internship programme began in 2009 and how the proportion of retirees has fallen greatly over the same period. Although the testing and training of young professionals has added significantly to the workload of the translation services, it is a strategic investment in capacity.

Figure XIII
Former interns and former staff (mostly retirees) hired on temporary contracts by the translation services in Geneva and New York, 2011-2015



55. As at 31 December 2015, the global vacancy rate in the language services stood at 8.9 per cent, as shown in the table. Across duty stations, vacancy rates ranged from 2.4 per cent in Geneva to 16.7 per cent in Nairobi. Although still the highest, the vacancy rate in Nairobi fell during the year from a high of 19 per cent in June 2015 and from a previous peak of 35 per cent. The higher vacancy rate in Nairobi has been largely due to two factors: the general shortage of suitably qualified language professionals, which enables staff to exercise preferences, and the absence of posts at the P-5 level and hence full career paths for language staff in Nairobi. To address the latter, 11 language posts (6 in translation/editing and 5 in interpretation) were upgraded to the P-5 level for filling in 2016. This is expected to enable the United Nations Office at Nairobi to attract and retain more experienced staff and reduce the vacancy rate to 10 per cent by the end of the year. The rate as at 31 May 2016 had already fallen to 10.9 per cent. A breakdown of the vacancy rate by occupational group and duty station as at 31 December 2015 is provided in section VI, part E, table 1, of the supplementary information.

Vacancy rates by duty station as at 31 December 2015

Duty station	*Vacant posts*	*Total posts*	*Vacancy rate (percentage)*
New York	67	647	10.4
Geneva	28	1 175	2.4
Nairobi	11	66	16.7
Vienna	4	108	3.7
Total	**108**	**1 230**	**8.9**

B. Outposting of translators to other duty stations

56. The administrative details for outposting five staff from the French Translation Service in New York to Vienna for a pilot period of two years beginning in the third quarter of 2016 were worked out in 2015. The arrangement will not only help to address the vacancy rate in the Service, but also will generate cost-efficiencies as a result of the lower staffing costs in Vienna (estimated potential savings of $45,000 over two years). It may also facilitate overnight processing thanks to the time difference and increase the mobility of language staff, while upholding quality and preserving the institutional memory of the Service.

C. Expansion of contractual capacity

57. The workload of the contractual translation units increased by 9.8 per cent between 2014 and 2015, both in absolute terms (by almost 6 million words) and as a percentage of the total translation workload (from 26 to 27 per cent). The increase in the proportion of documentation that was translated into French by contractual translators was particularly noticeable at Headquarters, where it exceeded 40 per cent several times during the year.

58. Intense efforts resulted in the number of translators on the contractual roster rising from 588 to 677, and careful capacity planning and the strategic management of rosters, including the removal of underperforming or inactive contractors, ensured that quality standards were upheld. A standardized methodology for quality control for use by all duty stations was endorsed for implementation in 2016, and quality control focal points were established in the services in which the bulk of externalized work is coordinated.

D. Reaching out to potential recruits

59. In 2015, the outreach programme made greater use of social media and remote tools for meeting, training and testing to reach more potential candidates in more regions more cost-effectively. The language careers portal (www.unlanguage.org) was revamped as a multilingual source of up-to-date, accurate and useful information for language professionals considering a career at the United Nations. In addition, language services set up language-specific social media accounts and produced in-house videos that were posted on a video-sharing website to raise awareness of career opportunities and share news and tips about subjects such as recruitment tests.

60. Language internships are continuing to prove a valuable investment of time and effort. A total of 23 services hosted between them 117 young professionals on internships, traineeships and short practicums in 2015, many of whom were subsequently offered temporary contracts or contractual work (subject to full revision). Internships and these initial contracts for translators at the outset of their careers serve as training and career orientation frameworks. For example, 10 of the 19 candidates who passed the competitive examination for English translators/précis-writers were former interns or had had freelance experience with the United Nations, or both. Some services continue to give remote coaching to translation students from select universities.

61. Many interns and trainees came from the universities that belong to the network of 22 universities that have signed memorandums of understanding with the United Nations for the training of language professionals. The network remains a strong source of new recruits, with 57 per cent of successful language competitive examination candidates rostered and 37 per cent of new freelance staff coming from such universities in 2015.

62. Plans were also put in place to continue to expand outreach to, and recruitment from, underrepresented regions, through the establishment of new partnerships in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. The Department contacted all permanent missions in New York in June 2015, asking them to help to identify outreach opportunities with universities, educational institutions and language learning centres. It received suggestions from three. A senior reviser in the French Translation Service in New York coached, remotely, eight translation students at Gaston Berger University in Senegal throughout the year.

63. Social media were used to encourage French-speaking language professionals in Africa to sit the language competitive examination for French translators held in July 2015. The examination was held in 22 countries, and a special effort was made to ensure that they included two sub-Saharan countries (Cameroon and Senegal). As a result, 69 candidates from African Member States sat the examination in 2015, more than twice as many as in 2014, and 3 passed. A similar effort will be undertaken to reach potential candidates in Latin America leading up to the language competitive examination for Spanish translators in 2016.

64. In December 2015, an agreement was concluded between the European Union and the United Nations Office at Nairobi to support the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation. The project is aimed at remedying the shortage of trained and skilled language professionals on the African market by creating a network of universities acting as centres of excellence in Africa to teach interpreting and translation. The project will cover three academic years (2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18) and has a budget of 3.7 million euros. The Office is responsible for setting up and supporting the permanent secretariat that will coordinate the Consortium's activities. More details on the project are provided in section VIII of the supplementary information.

VI. Improvement of facilities and accessibility

1. Improvement of facilities

65. The Office of Information and Communications Technology has established a global engineering and conference centre that will harmonize videoconferencing services at all four duty stations and in the regional commissions and improve service delivery by establishing greater governance, ensuring compliance with standards, improving communications and knowledge sharing, standardizing equipment and reinforcing security measures. Further information will be provided in the context of the progress report on the United Nations information and communications technology strategy to be submitted to the General Assembly at its seventy-first session.

2. Accessibility

66. In 2015, the Secretariat continued to provide sign-language interpretation services and real-time speech-to-text captioning at meetings entitled to such services in Geneva and New York, such as the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda, and to ensure that documentation was issued in electronic formats accessible to screen readers. In addition to the limited number of meetings for which such services are budgeted, accessible conference services are provided on request if funded by a Member State.

67. In New York, Braille embossing is available on demand through the Accessibility Centre, which continued to provide assistive devices to meeting participants in 2015. In Geneva, Braille documentation was provided upon request to members of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Human Rights Council task force on secretariat services, accessibility and use of information technology in English and Spanish, in keeping with the corresponding mandate. More information can be found in the accessibility guide to the Council for persons with disabilities (see www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/AccessibilityGuideHRC.pdf).

VII. Measuring the quality of conference services

68. The Department conducted an e-survey to capture feedback from Member States on common indicators covering meeting services, translation and interpretation services and the overall quality of conference services at the four duty stations. The e-survey results are presented in section VII, part F, of the supplementary information.

69. The e-survey is now shorter, more user-friendly and visually more appealing. Some questions are no longer mandatory, and deadlines for completion have been extended. Despite the measures taken in 2015 to increase participation, and although the e-survey was accessed 6,290 times globally, the response rate remains low, at only 5 per cent. More than 94 per cent of the 204 respondents, however, rated services as "very good" or "good".

70. To complement the e-survey, additional information and ratings were collected on technical Secretariat services in New York, and from six selected meetings in Geneva, where more than 94 per cent (of 256 respondents) also provided "very good" or "good" overall ratings. The United Nations Office at Nairobi carried out surveys for meetings held in Paris, Bonn (Germany), Bangkok, Geneva and Montevideo, for which conference services were rated as "excellent" or "good" again by 94 per cent of the respondents. More details on the measurement of conference-service quality are provided in section VII, part A, of the supplementary information.

71. In a global survey on paper-smart services at all four duty stations, 89 per cent of respondents indicated that the electronic availability of documents had had a positive impact on their work during the meetings, whereas 11 per cent indicated that there had been no impact; 90 per cent rated the service as either "very good" or "good".

Information meetings with delegations in 2015

72. Topics discussed in language-specific information meetings with delegations in New York, Geneva and Nairobi included the quality of translation and interpretation, global information technology tools, training, outreach and multilingualism, capacity management and prioritization of documents, practical tips for booking a meeting room and ensuring that interpreters can faithfully render statements in other languages. Questions were answered about interpretation into non-official languages and the services provided away from established headquarters. At the informational meeting held at the United Nations Office at Vienna in June, participants were briefed on initiatives to improve conference services, including the provision of digital recordings of meetings, the eSubscription and eCorrespondence applications, for distributing documents and communicating with permanent missions, and the PaperSmart application, which makes documents available for viewing on portable electronic devices and contributes to the "greening" of conference services at the United Nations. Delegates expressed satisfaction with the conference services provided and with the new electronic tools.

VIII. Conclusions, recommendations and proposed next steps

73. A sharp increase in the number of meetings serviced notwithstanding, the progress made in recent years in the utilization of allocated meeting services was sustained in 2015, and all but a fraction of requests by "as required" bodies were met, thanks to close collaboration between areas of the Department and strategic planning by conference management staff.

74. By leveraging technology to streamline processes, harmonize practices, reduce overlaps and increase productivity, and thanks to the willingness of staff to put in the required extra hours, significant improvements were recorded in the timely processing of documents, notwithstanding a surge in the documentation workload and the number of unplanned high-priority documents received. Proactive engagement with technical secretariats also facilitated compliance with word limits and submission deadlines.

75. Active outreach to potential candidates, the organization of 52 tests to retain contractual and temporary freelance staff and eight competitive examinations to fill staff posts succeeded in ensuring capacity during peak times, reducing vacancies and expanding the roster of contractors in 2015, enabling the Secretariat to meet the demands of its growing workload and improve performance. The introduction of remote testing has increased the candidate pool and the yield of recruitment tests.

76. In 2016 and beyond, considerable time and effort will continue to be invested by the Secretariat's language staff in training young professionals, through the networks of training institutions that it coordinates and social media and web-based tools, as well as in person, to ensure the future temporary, contractual and in-house capacity required to meet the growing demands for its conference services. Technological advances will be further leveraged to increase the accessibility of examinations and training, especially for language professionals from underrepresented regions, as well as the accessibility of meeting services for persons with disabilities, and to obtain feedback on and measure the Secretariat's performance in conference services.

77. Active engagement by conference management staff with calendar bodies will continue in 2016 with a view to optimizing the utilization of meeting services. In anticipation of an increased number of meetings being held away from Headquarters, training of conference-service coordinators will be stepped up. The Department will also work with author departments and offices in an effort to build planning requirements into the submission schedule of documents for the Fifth Committee during the main part of the seventy-first session of the General Assembly, as stipulated in paragraph 29 of Assembly resolution 70/247.

78. In response to changes in procedures brought about by the implementation of a fully electronic workflow, the reprofiling of language support functions will be piloted in New York, together with new interfaces for editing and revision. The feasibility of expanding remote testing will be analysed.

79. Projects planned for improving the accessibility of meeting services in 2016 include the standardization of hiring and working conditions for sign-language interpreters across the duty stations and outreach activities to increase the pool of International Sign interpreters.

Action recommended of the General Assembly

80. The Secretariat recommends that the General Assembly:

(a) Take note of the report;

(b) Urge those 38 intergovernmental bodies whose average utilization of allocated conference services has been below the benchmark of 80 per cent to take this into account when planning their future sessions with a view to achieving that benchmark;

(c) Request all Member States to comply with the guidelines on the submission of documentation in Word format to expedite document processing;

(d) Welcome the proposal of the Secretary-General that the digitization of older United Nations documents henceforth be reported on in the annual reports submitted by the Secretary-General to the Committee on Information and not under the agenda item entitled "Pattern of conferences".

Annex

Utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa

1. Conference service capacity at the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa exceeds demand, but utilization increased from 85 to 90 per cent in 2014-2015 thanks to proactive marketing initiatives targeting local and international organizations.

2. The renovation of Africa Hall is in the final phase. The project schedule had to be revised to meet the original completion deadline after longer-than-expected negotiations with the consultant. It is now as follows:

(a) Project manager appointment completed in 2016;

(b) Design and procurement of works to be completed in 2016;

(c) Construction and refurbishment to be completed in late 2017;

(d) Handing over to users in 2020;

(e) Project closure in late 2021.

3. The acquisition process to identify a qualified contractor to execute the renovation of the conference centre was completed in December 2015. The contractor has indicated December 2016 as the substantial completion date for the second phase of the renovation works. The unavailability or late provision of the required funds risks delaying completion. In close coordination with the contractors, the renovation works have been carefully scheduled in accordance with planned meetings and conferences. The redesign of podiums to meet accessibility requirements is behind schedule because the podium specifications are not yet finalized, but, together with the recarpeting, is expected to be completed by 2017.